

# **Supporting Twice-exceptional Students in Regular Classrooms in the United States**

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study is to provide pedagogical strategies for serving twice-exceptional students in regular classrooms in the United States. Specific discussion of definition, identification and characteristics of gifted and talented students with learning disabilities, current outlook of differentiating for gifted learners in the regular classroom in the United States are provided. Finally, pedagogical strategies that address the specific learning need for facilitating the use of differentiation in classrooms are discussed, including the use of modulating curriculum, modifying teaching and psychological support.

### **Introduction**

The concept of education is continuously changing. It is obvious that in America the importance of school education has become fundamental and that educational philosophy has become more standardized and formalized (Good and Brophy, 1987). However, the question of how best to assign students to classes has now arisen and is being hotly debated at the present time. Current practice and standards dictate that students are assigned to different classes according to their age, not their abilities. In addition, teaching instructions and curriculum guidelines for each grade level are established with reference to that particular grade level only. Furthermore, according to Morris (1989), the reality is that the majority of educators have difficulty understanding that a child can be both gifted and talented and have learning disabilities. As a result, it is likely that the ways of supporting and severing ability groupings for children with special needs are not found when both the skills and their learning problems are unable to identify. It is believed that any single educational opportunity should be equally beneficial to all students. Thus, the question of how to deal with gifted and talented learning-disabled students within schools and how, or indeed if, they are to be differentiated has been a matter of intense debate for many

years.

The definition of a student who is both learning-disabled and gifted is simple: these are students who suffer from learning disabilities that make a certain element of academic success challenging yet who also benefit from exceptional talents and are able to perform to a very high standard in certain areas (Fugit, 2004). The belief is that this group of people are the most overlooked element of the student body in American schools. Foley-Nicpon, Assouline and Colangelo (2013) has identified that the education movement connected with what are termed 'twice-exceptional' students in fact began as far back as the start of the 1970s with the 'gifted-handicapped' education movement. Since then, the education of twice-exceptional students has become a subject of increasing interest among researchers and educators who work in the areas of special education and talented education. A large number of specialists believe that the potential contributions that twice-exceptional individuals could make to US society will be wasted if suitable services and education is not provided to them.

Founded on research into how gifted and learning-disabled students learn, the current research presents a comprehensive examination of twice-exceptional students. The paper will help education specialists and teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the complicated matters surrounding this type of student. A number of strategies for teaching twice-exceptional students are also recommended in this paper, strategies designed to ensure that this student group flourishes in formal education.

This paper is composed of following sections. The first section will briefly introduce the definition of 'giftedness' and the ways in which gifted and talented students with learning disabilities can be identified. The second section will focus on establishing a framework for addressing the specific learning needs of children who are twice-exceptional. Then, this section will discuss strategies for recognizing and overcoming the obstacles faced by these students. The third section will focus

primarily on the challenges confronting educators and the gifted and talented students themselves in what is a one-size-fits-all learning environment.

### **The Definition and Identification of Gifted and Talented Students with Learning Disabilities**

In order to help gifted and talented students with learning disabilities to develop and make progress in an academic environment, it is necessary for teachers and educators to understand what ‘giftedness’ is and how best to identify gifted and talented with learning disabilities students.

The concept of twice-exceptional students appears to be relatively new. ‘Twice-exceptional’ is a term that can be defined as an ability grouping of gifted and talented children who also suffer from serious learning disabilities (Winebrenner, 2003). Several learning disabilities include elements of being gifted, such as children with Asperger syndrome who lack the ability to recognise social cues and may lack inborn social skills with the result that they are not able to read peers’ or others’ body language or even start or maintain a conversation.

Typically, standardized intelligence tests are used as a measurement tool when evidence of gifted and talented learners’ potential abilities is being sought. However, the use of IQ tests for identifying gifted and talented students has many problems. Further, IQ tests as a measurement tool for gifted and talented children has become an increasingly controversial issue, not to mention the use of IQ tests on ability groupings with learning disabilities. For example, Ramos-Ford and Gardner (1991) are concerned that intelligence tests as a measurement tool may have a limited range of abilities. According to Fox and Brody (1983), when testing the abilities of twice-exceptional students, the measurement may be particularly insensitive to scores that are depressed due to the disability.

At present, three categories of twice-exceptional students have been gradually

recognized, whereas, there are the majority of which are currently being neither unidentified nor suitably catered for by the American education system (Baum, Owen and Dixon, 1991). The first category of twice-exceptional students is those who find academic performance in the classroom challenging but who are identified as gifted and talented students. The students in this group are often described as 'underachievers'. Whitmore (1980), Silverman (1989) and Waldron, Saphire and Rosenblum (1987) have suggested numerous reasons why these students underperform, for example, poor self-image, low motivation or even indolence. The learning disabilities of this student group are typically not identified for the majority of their school lives. However, the steady progression of social development in America means that US schools are becoming increasingly demanding and thus low performance in schools may become more obvious which in turn can result in more students being identified as potentially suffering from a learning disability. The second category of twice-exceptional students includes students whose status as gifted has not been identified but who suffer from sufficiently serious learning disabilities for these to have been acknowledged and addressed. It has been shown that over a third of students who have been identified as learning-disabled also have an exceptional intellectual skill (Baum, 1985). Intractable expectations within an education system and the underestimation of the abilities of these students can compromise their progress. The failure to acknowledge their particular skills undoubtedly has an impact on the efficacy of their educational plan. The final category of twice-exceptional students is the most common. It is believed that the disabilities and abilities of the students in this group can cancel each other out, leading teachers and others to see these young people as 'average'. As neither the learning disabilities nor the special talents of these students are acknowledged they do not have access to the services offered to either gifted or learning-disabled students. These students are most often not seen to require any special attention as they function at grade level.

Only when the above categories are fully understood can the true situation of students

be identified and suitable education programmes implemented.

### **The Characteristics of Twice-exceptional Students**

Students who are both talented and have learning incapacities show surprising gifts in several areas and shortcomings in others (Baum, 1990). According to Robinson (1999), typically, these students are careless and even lack of administrative skills. They may be easily distracted in class, lack of essential spelling or reading abilities, have poor relationship with their classmates and low respect toward themselves, or refuse to participate school-related activities. In the meantime, they may show extraordinary areas, such as excellent vocabularies, exceptional logical and understanding skills. Further, they may show remarkable interest or ability in specific fields or use advanced critical thinking aptitudes. Winebrenner (2003) notes that these students with learning issues normally manifest themselves when in the school setting, but at home they show exceedingly dynamic and inspired to seek different interests.

As indicated by Susan (2003), creativity, intelligence and affection when twice-exceptional students pursuit to their interests are clear pointers of their talent. It is obvious that twice-exceptional students do not fit into either the category of the talented or the learning disabilities. Twice-exceptional students are often sensitive and appear to be highly aware of their learning disabilities. According to Baum and Owen (1988), twice-exceptional learners are likely considered to be the most troublesome students at schools by educators. It is important for educators to be aware of the characteristics of twice-exceptional students. Diagnosing the abilities and disabilities of these students correctly so that educators are able to support them.

### **The Current Outlook of Twice-exceptional Students in America**

As noted by Gentry and Fugate (2012), the United States is clearly a multilingual and multicultural country. Education is believed to be an integral part of a country and reflective of its societal structure (Ghaill, 1988). As a result, the aim of public schools in America is to educate all the students in an inclusive environment, which means in

the contemporary American classroom, children of different skill levels should be taught together. However, it is likely that students with exceptional learning needs exist in every classroom, a few young people even demonstrate an example of great qualities consolidated with areas of huge trouble.

Utilizing information from sources, for example, the U.S. Department of Education, current evaluations propose that there are approximately 360,000 twice-exceptional groupings in America's schools (National Education Association, 2006). As a result, it is essential for educators to aware and understand about twice-exceptionality across the nation. Although there are increasingly attentions to twice-exceptionality, the reality is that these students are forgotten by America's educational framework.

American federal law guarantees that all gifted and talented groupings with learning disabilities have the privilege to a free and appropriated education (FAPE). The present educational system put an emphasizes on related education curriculum and services designed in order to meet their special needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and develop the abilities of independent living.

### **Challenges for Twice-exceptional Students in the Regular Classroom**

Most American public schools provide an inclusive educational environment, thereby, it is clear that the large proportion of twice-exceptional students spend most of their time in regular classroom settings. Subsequently, gifted and talented students with learning disabilities may face challenges that include both learning issues and emotional issues.

Learning issues is one of the challenges for twice-exceptional students. Learning-disabled students are more likely to perceive themselves as deficient in academic performance, which likely lead to an increasing motivation to escape school tasks. According to Gardner's multiple intelligences theory (1993), students have preferred learning styles or gifted and talented learners with a reading disability which

is well known as dyslexia, for example, they may have problems maintain sound or symbol relationships, issues retain word spelling as well as the ability of visual perceptual. Research also indicates that many students with visual difficulties find auditory and tactile-kinaesthetic formats for learning of great benefit. It is likely that the aforementioned problems are not obvious in a classroom setting and are only apparent to observant diagnosticians during individual assessments.

Emotional issues also affect twice-exceptional students. Twice-exceptional students who hold themselves up to a high standard in relation to academic performance may work harder and longer. Due to their learning challenges, twice-exceptional students may be continually dissatisfied with the results of their labours. It is likely that academic failures lead to outrage for the school and those who have high expectations. The majority of twice-exceptional students negative adapting systems that they embrace to manage cope with the anger, frustration and fears when difficulties appear in academic tasks, thereby, it likely leads to lower self-confidence, lower risk-taking behaviour and they may be unwilling to put effort into tasks that highlight academic weaknesses.

### **Pedagogical Strategies that Address the Specific Learning Needs of Twice-exceptional Students**

It is a difficult task for educators to balance the expectations that go along with being gifted with efforts to overcome learning disabilities. Consequently, it is clear that a strong support group is needed to assist twice-exceptional students. Developing an instructional plan or conducting useful strategies for students of distinctive capacities, at the same time, still retaining a sense of community within the classroom is a challenging and enlightening experience for educators. This may be the central issue for educators who teach twice-exceptional students in regular classroom settings.

According to Susan (2003), many educators often have difficulty understanding that students with learning difficulties might also be gifted in different areas of learning.

However, Van Tassel-Baska, Zuo, Avery and Little (2002) note that when educators apply advanced teaching models and strategies which relate to relevant content, the abilities and achievements of students with learning abilities advance significantly. Thus, the need of continuous training and modelling of relevant pedagogical skills are essential for educators.

Curriculum compacting is an essential strategies for teaching twice-exceptional students and enhances their abilities and ensures the progress. It is clear that twice-exceptional students need curricula to be appropriately modified so that they are able to meet their special educational needs. Moreover, the student's own needs, abilities and interests should be taken into consideration when educational programmes or curriculum designed for twice-exceptional. According to Whitmore and Maker (1985), these students' needs are linked to their specific intellectual intelligence as well as to their specific learning disabilities. Providing assistance to intelligent students with learning disabilities in areas of weakness is crucial, as is devoting time to acknowledging and developing their gifts. In contrast to their same-age peers, the need of improving and encouraging cognitive experiences through for twice-exceptional students which they are able to use critical thinking abilities and problem-solving skills. When planning or modifying the educational curriculum so that they better align with the educational needs of twice-exceptional students, it is essential to put emphasises on the development of the strengths, interests and intelligent abilities of these individuals. It seems that the impact of learning disabilities is by and large permanent, therefore the use of compensation strategies is important to teach and stimulate by educators. These strategies along the lines of the use of advanced curriculum material, other advanced teaching methods as well as provide a variety of communication opportunities. According to Baum (1990) , no matter what types of enrichment activity are being used, the basic discipline should be focus on the development of strengths and interests and to challenge the learner.

Furthermore, pedagogical methods and learning activities for twice-exceptional

students must focus on stopping the disability from presenting obstacles to the development of the students' talent and study. Guidance and assistance are needed when twice-exceptional students endeavour to precisely comprehend the way of their learning disabilities as well as the way of their talent. Whitmore and Maker (1985) believe that it is important for educators to help students cultivate a healthy study environment and to induce students to accept the fact that they have personal strengths and weaknesses. The educational strategies utilised must enable students to make progress and must compensate for their learning disabilities. In addition, different ways for thinking and communicating need to be developed for twice-exceptional students so that they are able to gain knowledge according to their strengths (Reis, Neu and McGuire, 1995). Twice-exceptional students should likewise be allowed to experience the same compacting educational curriculum and the same differentiation opportunities while other students have and pre-assessments can be used to enable students to master previous content in order to ensure they are well-prepared for upcoming content. Winebrenner (2003) believes that the progress of twice-exceptional students can be enhanced by programmes that help the students to, for example, go through new content-relevant material at a faster or slower pace and that worktime should be allocated to projects related to topics which they are particularly interested in. The opportunities mentioned above should be provided to twice-exceptional students not simply because they are gifted and talented, but because all students should have the right to experience the promises made in schools' and states' teaching mission statements (Susan, 2003).

Additionally, it is educators' responsibility to respond to diverse populations along the lines of twice-exceptional students. It is a difficult task for educators to identify students who have twice-exceptionality, let alone to help them to make progress. However, utilizing learning strategies such as non-standardized tests, pre-assessments or vary modalities for the implementation of assignments, such as instead of handwritten work, using computer is one of effective ways. Moreover, allowing flexibility in assignments may have positive impact in overcoming learning

disabilities. Further, it is important for teachers to teach students to appreciate and respect individual differences. In order to accept the presence of differentiation opportunities for all students in a regular class, teachers need to put effort into helping all the students recognise as well as respect individual differences. It is obvious that educators have the ability to consistently show that individual differences is a positive aspect, thereby, students are likely follow their lead and acknowledgment of individual differences. It is obvious that educators need to put efforts to promote a sense of respect for individual differences, so as to help students make progress.

Mentorships is one strategy for gifted and talented students with learning disabilities that should be taken into consideration. And according to Winebrenner (2003) the mentors not only be regarded as role models, but also offering the opportunity for students to gain knowledge in relation to a subject of interest in a one-on-one environment. Educators are able to assist twice-exceptional students and ensure that they make progress when the educators themselves understand that students have multiple intelligences and preferred learning styles. For those learners who find visual formats most effective, educators should conduct reading tasks or visual methods such as demonstrating the relationship between images and meanings as well as between space and effect. A substantial number of students with learning problems may also suffer from sensory problems. They may be more comfortable in places where they have more opportunities to communicate, or they may prefer soft light to bright areas and regularly being given the chance to move around.

It seems that twice-exceptional students can significantly benefit from using all of their senses when learning. Some students respond to musical rhymes and chants as the basic action of chanting or singing content can make it a lot easier for students to absorb. Movement can also be incorporated into lessons. The need to move about can be seen as a real style of learning and movement can assist many students to master certain content. For example, instead of simply answering a question students can be asked to make different movements to signify their response. Team games can also be

utilised and students asked to move to specific places in the classroom to provide their response. Just giving students Kush Balls or other squeezable objects keeps their hands active. It is important that kinaesthetic learners not be given the 'ADHD' label. It is common for twice-exceptional students to have a preference for experiential learning processes. However, the use of these kinds of activities is only effective if it enables students to learn both concrete and abstract concepts. Physically changing objects can assist twice-exceptional students to comprehend ideas when they are applied in a more abstract way. These students' comprehension of content and ideas is commonly enhanced when they are physically engaged rather than simply listening or reading and thus models, visual representations, projects and assignments can be of help.

Acceleration and enrichment as two approaches for educators to meet the needs of gifted and talented students with learning disabilities. First and foremost, acceleration should include quickly progressing of one's same-age peers in evaluation arrangement or subject matter (Southern and Jones, 1991). The benefits of subject matter acceleration for gifted and talented students with learning disabilities when they are able to obtain advanced course framework or knowledge in their areas. Examples along the line of students are good at learning a foreign language might progress rapidly at through an accelerated in foreign language class. Even if these students have learning disabilities with reference to calculate or creative writing (Benbow, 1986). The purposes of enrichment programmes are aiming at providing twice-exceptional students' diverse educational experience, which by modifying the depth and breadth of educational curriculum or by offering topics as well as contents that usually not included in the curriculum.

Lastly, strategies involving counselling support may also help twice-exceptional students. It is believed that psychological conflict is frequently happened twice-exceptional students who have difficulties accomplishing in academic areas (Olenchak, 2001). It is clear that the counselling support can be undertaken by

teachers who are very familiar with the needs of twice-exceptional students (Daniels, 1983; Hishinuma, 1993; Baum et al., 1991).

## **Conclusion**

Students with twice-exceptionality display both remarkable talents and learning disabilities. It is essential that educators need to be aware that one student can be at both extremes of the ability spectrum and can thus be gifted and learning-disabled. It is vital to recognise and cultivate the interests and strengths of different ability groupings. If a student is identified as gifted but is underachieving, it must be investigated whether this individual is also suffering from a learning disability. Not until twice-exceptionality is found not to apply should withdrawing the student from the gifted programme be contemplated. Similarly, recognising giftedness in learning-disabled students is essential as these students may need access to services to grow their abilities.

A student's self-esteem and belief in their abilities can be worsened by the absence of identification of twice-exceptionality and the absence of suitable services. By understanding their own unique strengths and weaknesses, students become empowered to be proactive in their education experience. For a twice-exceptional student, the optimum learning environment is one in which lessons and services cater for their disabilities and giftedness in equal measure.

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